

The End of the Party?

Will Rogers is credited as having said: "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." So too it may be an exaggeration to argue that Donald Trump has destroyed the Republican Party.

Republican officeholders and officialdom are beginning to panic. Running for the life rafts, which were inadequate to hold the number of people on board, created panic that helped to raise the death toll on the Titanic.

The Republican Party is neither the Titanic nor the self-effacing humorous Will Rogers. However, it is in trouble.

This is not the first time that one of the great American parties has been rent asunder by its own leadership. After the Civil War the Democratic Party shut down the rush of Southern Blacks to the Republican Party by reinstating a new kind of slavery. Teddy Roosevelt and the Progressive Republicans abandoned the mainstream party to found the Bull Moose Party, which led to the presidency of the quixotic and bumbling Woodrow Wilson. However, the Republicans came roaring back in the 20's and inadvertently established the foundation of the Franklin Roosevelt Rule. The Republicans split somewhat again during the Civil Rights era of the 60's, although generally climbed on board to the Lyndon Johnson freedom train which led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Democrats have also been woefully split. After the Civil War while the party became the legal extension of the Ku Klux Klan, northern Democrats began to go their own way, appealing to new immigrant populations and big city enfranchisement of the new potential voters. The split between Northern and Southern Democrats continued right up to the Clinton presidency. The Dixiecrats gave way to the Southern liberal.

Currently there will be those in the Republican Party who will join President Trump in exile. Others, the Bush/Romney wing, will attempt to steer their party to a more centrist course.

One of the few leaders to create leaders, rather than frustrated followers, was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Notwithstanding his other dictatorial tendencies, he created not a backlash, but rather a tsunami of likeminded leaders. Truman was a natural successor of Roosevelt, because of Roosevelt's death. However, Dwight Eisenhower who followed Truman was initially courted by the Democrats. He was a war hero and not nearly as ideological as politicians at the time would suggest. Even Kennedy and Nixon look like centrists by today's standards. With Carter, Reagan and Clinton, the pendulum began to swing to a more dramatic contrast between leadership. Those Presidents created followers, but few leaders. Some might argue that the first George Bush presidency represented a leader created by the success of Ronald Reagan. That is debatable, but not an easily discarded point of view.

Today we are faced with an outgoing Republican President, Donald Trump, who has created perhaps a few leaders, over 71 million followers, and lots of over-the-top angry Democrats. Whether Trump's Presidency will simply degenerate into a trail of

debris or whether it gives rise to a new generation of likeminded leaders is a question to be determined by the future.

Clearly, the best thing Donald Trump could do for his party is to depart the stage gracefully, a practical impossibility for him, and to become an elder statesman. An elder statesman in Trump's position can create and build leadership which places America first while pursuing the philosophy that a rising tide lifts all boats. With that approach, the party has at least a chance of gaining support of minority communities. Somebody once said that the Democratic Party had become the party of the "welfare man" while the Republican Party stood the chance of becoming the party of the "working man." Such thinking is outdated, as both parties attempt to posit themselves as the guardian of those who work hard everyday to support themselves and their family. It is that overlap which drives electoral victories. In this election, Donald Trump lost an election he could have won by trying to prove that he was a non-politician through amateurish and unpleasant invective. The Democrats, of course, had their own share of irresponsible, nonsensical verbiage which they cast upon the voting population as so much flotsam upon the sea.

Doubtless the Republican Party is not at the end of its long road. It has every chance to regain the popularity of the party of Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt before the latter become discouraged by the party's turn towards the businessmen who drove the Industrial Revolution.

I am told that my grandfather voted for the Socialist Eugene Debs in every election in which Debs ran, while the pendulum swung the other direction for my father who became a stalwart Republican. The pendulum will keep swinging from generation to generation and party to party, but those who succeed will find some middle ground within which to apply their particular brand of America First. For President-elect Joe Biden to posit himself as a nice guy demonstrates the lessons he learned over more than 40 years in politics. However, a successful presidency it does not guarantee. Biden will have to trod the path of centrist politics that safeguards the nation against a flood of illegal immigrants, dangerous trade deals with the likes of the Chinese while at the same time providing opportunity to Americans without bankrupting the rest of us. No president has ever had an easy job, but what we should learn from the last election is that a little bit of menschlichkeit goes a long way. Now there is a word to look for in this week's exercise.

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